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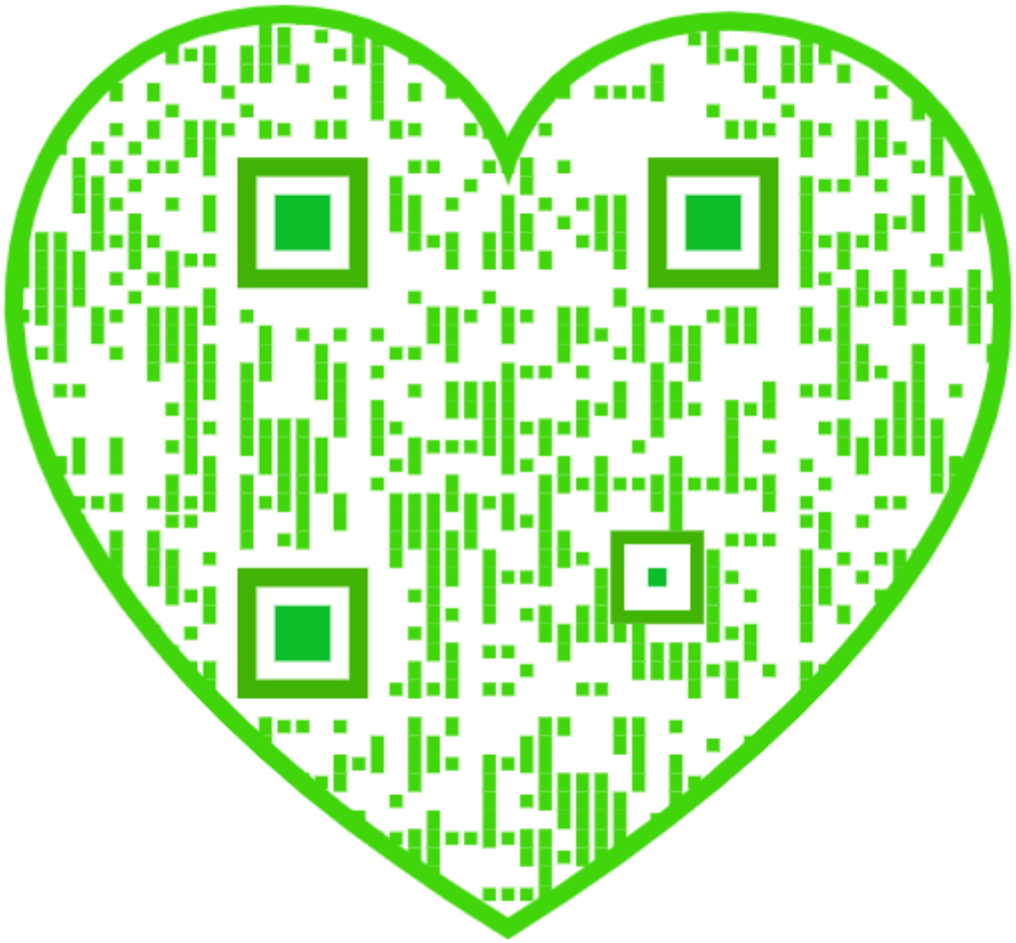

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Newcastle, 1823

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A

RATIONAL ENQUIRY

CONCERNING

THE OPERATION

OF

The Stage

ON

THE MORALS OF SOCIETY.

VALEAT QUANTUM VALERE POTEST.

BY DAVID M'NICOLL.

Newcastle upon Tyne:

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THIS *Essay*, lately published in successive numbers of *The Newcastle Courant*, is now enlarged, and printed in a more convenient form, with the hope of its being rendered more extensively useful in the cause of truth and virtue.

Newcastle upon Tyne, July 1, 1823.

A

RATIONAL ENQUIRY.

I. *The Question Stated.*

THE imitative arts, as they produce their effects by pleasure, and therefore have pleasure for their primary intention, are in their nature eminently calculated to please. The reason is said to be this,—that we naturally love to learn; and, in imitation, our flattered sagacity discovers a resemblance between two things. Perhaps a principal reason is, the richness of having two ideas instead of one, as in the use of metaphor. The talent of the imitator must also come in for a share, as it strikes with admiration, and disposes the mind to take an interest in any subject whatever, which the artist has chosen to imitate. It is something peculiar in the subject itself, and in its circumstances, that alone can beat back the tide of pleasure which naturally attends upon resemblance, and turn the whole into a scene of disgust or horror.

Imitation, then, will please different persons according to their different intellectual tastes, and moral habitudes and feelings. Still, in every instance, imitation tends to please. Hence the picture of a rotten tree, or an old house, subjects of themselves unalluring, gives a charm to the fancy.

Shall we then allow that *every* thing may be imitated? Have such arts no bounds? May obscene prints, for instance, if ingeniously executed, be allowably presented to the public? Should poison be called the subject imitated, and sweetness the imitation, could any one be so enslaved to pleasure as to swallow down a mixture of both?

Apply this to the theatre, which imitates human character and life. The pleasure here is allowed to be great. Poetry itself is rich in imitation. He, therefore, who personates a character by poetic expression and by action, presents a double enjoyment to the auditor. This, together with its splendid accompaniments, forms a compound of pleasures that cannot fail to fascinate; for pleasure, of one description or another, is the element in which mankind seek to dwell.

The intense charm of theatrical entertainments was the very reason why PLATO deemed them dangerous, and on which he built all his objections to them. It is true, he

was the well-known enemy of poetry in general; but this does not subtract from the weight of his opinions when he offers them on argument. It only goes to say, that he was not always in the right, which, I presume, may be said of even the most distinguished patrons of the theatre; yet who would draw the conclusion, that, therefore, he was no authority.

Suppose, then, it be proper to imitate certain parts of human life, it will not be contended that *all* transactions really occurring, or of possible occurrence, may be publicly imitated. The position is too monstrous to be dwelt upon for a moment. The Greek rules of the drama itself point out some things which are forbidden to be acted; not merely because they are deemed poetically bad, but because they are morally so; nay, they are pronounced poetically vicious for the express reason that they are immoral.

The exhibition, however, of immorality, *to some extent*, is essential to the existing stage; for characters perfectly good, or good characters without bad ones associated in the same piece, would not possess probability; a circumstance which would destroy the illusion. Besides, without the *excess* and *collision* of certain evil passions, that dramatic interest or effect could not be produced, which is professed to be the grand excellence of the drama. A

chief Question then occurs,—*How far may moral evil be thus exhibited with safety*, or *advantage to society?*

He who reasons on this question from what is peculiar to the authority and substance of the Christian System, as distinguished from every other, encounters difficulties in the outset. Infidelity denies his principles, and the truth of Christianity must be agreed upon between the parties, before they can advance a single step in the argument. Should they decide the previous question against the Sacred Scriptures, they might then, perhaps, unite to follow pleasure, on the maxim,—" Let us eat " and drink, for to-morrow we die." Though should the infidel allow of patriotism and humanity, as the meeting place of conflict, it would be quite possible, in my opinion, to resist, on this comparatively narrow field, with ruin to his cause, any defence which he might make in behalf of the theatre.

Suppose again they should unite in embracing Christianity, it might still be a question,—*Are we agreed as to what this system is?* For example, if the one assumes love to God as a ground of his objection to the theatre, and explains himself as to his conception of this love, that it implies, among other things included in supreme attachment, the liveliest joy to see the honour of the divine

name held sacred among men, and the most sensitive alarm and sorrow at the contrary; properties which, in their proportion, belong essentially even to that love which a man owes to his friend in civil society; the other probably replies by saying,—What you call love to God, I call downright enthusiasm. And here again the argumentation is at an end.

Or, should it be prolonged, with some good accidental reasoning on either side, the parties, finding their feet not fixed upon the rock of proper data, beat the wind instead of reaching their respective objects; severally seizing, with clamorous avidity, on some inferior part, because it is vulnerable, and treating it at great length. But do they forget the *body* of the reasoning? O no! That must be *touched*, for here lies the policy of doing the thing *completely*.

He who fights against the theatre, perhaps goes on to dogmatize, as if his own naked opinion were sufficient to give law to the public; and it is well if he does not assume a manner of illogical dictation amounting to overt acts of uncharitableness; and thus his well-meant endeavours only injure the cause he means to support. On the other hand, his opponent, instead of arguing dispassionately and candidly, or ceasing to argue at all when he thinks contempt should fill the chair of reason, strives

be somewhat witty and flagellant, in a plentiful use of the terms cant, saintship, puritanism, hypocrisy, &c. But as morality at large, including the recognition of the Christian Scheme, as to those of its parts and properties in which the professing world are agreed, presents probably an arena into which all who concern themselves with the controversy may most conveniently enter, it is but consistent with this common ground, that the dispute be conducted with equal fairness on both sides.

I shall beg the candid indulgence of the reader to THE JOINT FORCE OF THE WHOLE of the following Remarks. They will chiefly refer—*To the* DIRECT TENDENCY *of theatrical exhibitions of vice,—to those* PRINCIPLES OF THE DRAMA *on which these exhibitions in particular, and the theatre in general, are professed to be of use to the morals of society,—and to* MISCELLANEOUS ARGUMENTS AND REFLECTIONS *connected with the subject.*

II. *On the Direct Tendency of Dramatic Exhibitions of Vice.*

WE think the representation of that which is intrinsically criminal, or improper, is, not absolutely, and in every possible instance, but *as*

commonly shewn upon the theatre, of very pernicious tendency.

We think so, in the *first place*, from the nature of dramatic personation. Some passions, indeed, may be properly embodied by the arts, or otherwise, for deliberate examination; others are, in their own nature, when exhibited, so insidious and contagious, that all moralists agree to urge, in regard to them,—Your safety lies in flight. With such it is extremely hazardous to tamper, though under the design of strengthening our virtue by the mock encounter. Agreeably to this distinction, St. Paul, referring to one description of such passions, says, "*Flee* youthful lusts," which, we are elsewhere informed, "War against the soul."

Now we are affected in proportion to the breadth and colour with which a subject is presented to our perception. A subject affects with but comparative slightness by means of the thoughts. Written words and sentiments are signs which involve a still more impressive medium. The same subject, supposing it to be within the art of the painter, would touch yet more powerfully if presented to the eye in a picture. The naked force of oratory might further add to its influence. But exemplified by the living imitation on the stage, the effect is most powerful; especially as the whole receives a peculiar augmentation of effect from

the action. There is thus a material difference between a play perused in the closet, and seen as performed.

In whatever way we chuse to present any instance of moral evil to the consideration of others, it is our duty to stop short of seductiveness. In doing so, we ought to observe a SCALE OF IMPRESSION, fixed, I think, by the experience, good sense, and morality of all the worthier part of mankind. As to the language of a wicked man, for instance, it might be such as, read in private, would merely address itself to the *understanding*, or *fancy ;* but spoken by a public actor, would reach the *passions.* The same base individual might again use terms, an *account* of which, and of the character expressed by them, might be given with propriety, as an epic poet does when he speaks in his own person, but which would not be decent or proper to be written *verbatim et literatim.* He might even proceed to such expressions, cruelties, and abominations, as to render it impossible to describe them at all with decorum. It was, no doubt, this danger of *acting wickedness* which gave rise to the observation of PLATO, " That the poets should be obliged " to imitate good characters, or not to imitate " at all."*

* Rep. iii. p. 401 B.

Now passions of the above dangerous description are of the very essence of the modern theatre, as acknowledged and lamented by its best and warmest friends. Christianity, which has improved all other institutions, affords, it would appear, no counteraction to this tendency of the stage; the antient drama, with few exceptions, being, in this respect, comparatively pure. A heathen audience thirsted for intellectual enjoyment: we are sensual, and must be entertained with shows and tricks, and corrupted and perverted passions. Nay, the author of the *Poetics*, with all his love for tragedy, is very sensitive even on the subject of painting, as endangering the morals of youth. He says, "Young men should not be permitted to con-"template the works of PAUSON, but those only "of POLYGNOTUS, and of other artists, who ex-"celled in moral expression."* It may also be observed, that what is originally innocent will sometimes be morally injurious in the copy. Might any common courtship, though proper in itself, be indiscriminately shewn to youth? What then is the neutralizing circumstance that makes the dramatic imitation safe and useful?

I now submit, whether this argument does not receive much additional strength from a *second* view of the subject—that of the corrupt

* De Rep. viii. 5.

state of society. The theatre is allowed to be a place of hazardous enchantment, even for those who yet are uncontaminated by temptation. Sir Walter Scott himself, a distinguished friend of the stage, (for I will not alarm the reader with puritanical authorities), in his elegant *Dissertation on the Drama*, when speaking of the immoral influence of genteel comedy in particular, makes the following concession :—" It " is not so probable that the *Beggar's Opera* " has sent any one from the two shilling gal- " lery to the highway, as that a youth entering " upon the world, and hesitating between good " and evil, may, for instance, be determined " to the worse course, by the gay and seduc- " tive example of Lovemore, or Sir Charles " Easy." This one sentence, from so eminent a judge, speaks volumes.

What then must be the effect of the system, bearing down with repeated, and accumulated strength, upon the *corrupt and abandoned* part of the populace? It remains, however, to be shewn, that such vicious persons come in any great numbers within the range of theatrical influence; for some well intentioned persons, who resort to this amusement, find it difficult to believe, that the company with whom they mix is *very generally* immoral; is not, indeed, respectable. Respectable and moral are epithets of widely different import. That persons

of respectability, as the civil custom of society terms them, are frequently at perfect variance with *Christian morals*, is most evident from the single instance of allowed intoxication ; to omit several other instances of immorality, of which a gentleman, in this charitable world, may continue to be guilty, and yet maintain a character confessedly respectable.

That, in many cases, vicious characters constitute the body of the theatrical assemblage, is acknowledged by the above high authority, who observes of the London theatres—" That un- " less in case of strong attraction, prostitutes " and their admirers usually form the principal " part of the audience." The same may be said in lower, but proportionate degrees, of theatres in the country. Whatever be the cause of this corrupt assemblage, the fact is the same. Indeed, if the theatre be a place precisely suited to the relish of the immoral classes of society, and *only not quite so much* adapted to the taste of those of an opposite description, (whether this taste in either case be sound or not, is here of no consequence), it follows, that the majority of the audience will be at least of deficient character on the score of *Christian morals*.

This has been illustrated, I think very happily, in some such manner as the following. Let the moral genius of the theatre be ascertained, as poisoned waters have sometimes been tested

by the introduction of a healthy fish into the fountain, which fish has betokened the suspected fact, by shewing a certain restlessness or languor. Let a person, for instance, of cultivated piety and morality, attend on the services of religion; he is perfectly at home, he is happy. Introduce him to the theatre. Is he now in his element? Does he enter with a genuine and vigorous joy, into all that is passing? A person of this character, if we even suppose him capable of sometimes resorting to the theatre, as an innocent amusement, so denominated, cannot possibly admit of that delightful absorption of his faculties in this pursuit, which he allows in those grand duties of life that are perfectly congenial with his virtuous inclinations. He will abandon it the moment he finds it forfeiting, by an excessive excitement, either of the spirits or of the passions, the character of an exhilirating relaxation. Nor will he be always at the play even when he requires to be amused. Other recreations will, with him, have their turn, and that in proportion to their comparative degrees of importance. Were it not so, he would seem to be the slave of this single enchantment, which is contrary to the virtues we suppose him to possess. Pleasure is not his *business*, and the theatre will not be a place of his *much* desired resort. Considerations of expence, &c. which the vicious, in their love of

this amusement, overleap at one free bound, will frequently detain *him* from this scene of gratification. Remember, I do not grant the virtuous instance in question; but merely suppose it for the sake of argument, because it is in favour of those who plead for the drama.

Now, let us behold a person of abandoned character and habits. Lead him to church or chapel. Is he interested and delighted? That is impossible. Conduct him to the play, and what do you perceive? Listlessness and unconcern? No, indeed! The man is in an extacy of pleasure. When he sat in the church, his thoughts were sometimes in the theatre; now he is in the theatre, are his thoughts gone to church? Nor is this a fancied view of the subject: it is matter of established fact. Now, on this principle of moral taste, neither church nor theatre, will be a common ground of meeting between these two characters. In other cases they may associate, and with mutual satisfaction, as to transact affairs in trade; but at the appearance of some grand moral test, they will naturally separate. Should each then, on some extraordinary occasion, be found in the place, (church or theatre), which stands opposed to his moral preference, it will arise from some *subordinate* consideration, and not from the general spring and character of the mind. There are, however, obvious reasons

why immoral persons may be expected more frequently to visit churches, than good men the theatre.

The inference deducible from these observations, is, that, generally speaking, the theatre will be the resort of vitiated characters. Nor is it an argument against this, that numbers who attend the play, are very far removed from the *most vicious* of the audience; and are *comparatively* decent and respectable; for moral evil can subsist in a multiplicity of modifications and degrees, among those who, far from avowing the principles of the infidel, yet are greatly destitute of *Christian morality*, or *piety*, and would indeed feel some shame to be considered as much concerned about it.

That society is in a state of actual corruption is indisputable; and the argument is the same, whatever be the origin of the mischief. If it be acquired merely by example, as some affirm, I should think this is not much in favour of fictitious specimens of moral evil; and one great advocate of the stage expressly attributes human depravity to the principle of imitation.* If it be the developement of something properly original, innate, and radicated in the character; thus presenting a material highly combustible to the fire of temptation, as

* See Fellowes's *Christian Philosophy*, p. 122.

the Scriptures, in my opinion, have put beyond all just exception; it may then be judged, *a priori*, what would be the effect of a theatrical picture of immorality moving with seductive life before the eye of the vicious, even on the supposition that some corrective circumstances accompanied the representation. The heart is more likely to sympathize with that part of the exhibition which is the entertaining archetype of its own character, than with that which is pure and good; as the steel leaves other substances with which it is but loosely combined, and rushes on the magnet. And this chiefly because of the pleasurable imitation; for the same evil judiciously set forth in words, or incidentally discovered in real life, would probably produce a very different, and much more salutary effect.

History abounds with instances of moral evil; but these are not to be compared with dramatic pictures of this kind. I recur to the scale of impression referred to above, and ask, is there not an obvious—an essential difference between narrative and action? Besides, as the chief design of history is not to entertain, but to instruct, it is by no means so liable as the drama to stray from the path of utility. And the frequently unnatural and false outline and structure of fictitious characters, which Sir Walter Scott particularly charges on the

German stage, must be dangerous in the last degree; such virtues and vices as are, in truth and fact, incompatible attributes of the same person, being sometimes found in combination; lasciviousness, for instance, with modesty; not a modesty intended as the mask of hypocrisy, but as an integral part of the man. And what will any Christian say of soothing allusions to the eternal rest and peace of a dramatic character, who died, perhaps covered with sin, and in the spirit of revenge?

It now appears, that corrupt examples on the stage act upon a huge mass of similar corruption. And when we consider how naturally, and without assistance, this corruption overswells its banks, and demands suppression rather than the help of dramatic genius, and songs, &c. to open the way for its highest tide and spread, one is tempted to ask, in the singular language of a living writer, "Who would "add momentum to an avalanche from the "Andes, or accelerate the bolt that speeds "from the secret place of thunder?"

The vicious character of plays in general is a *third* argument on this subject. This character is either essential or incidental. It appears that the essential rules of the drama, as invented by the antients, require at least a hazardous exhibition of bad sentiments and passions. It has indeed been thought quite possible to con-

struct a tragedy or comedy which might be innocent and edifying. This was the opinion of the celebrated RICHARD BAXTER. What sort of theatre it would be, which should exhibit nothing truly dramatic, or resembling real life, —nothing, or next to nothing, of moral evil, contrasted with its opposite,—nothing of the pungent interest which arises from depth of plot and passion, it is difficult to say. It might be edifying, as preceptial and declamatory, employing dramas something like the fourth kind of tragedy specified in the *Poetics*, as chiefly sentimental, and which the great critic deems the most insipid sort of tragic writing; yet in this kind of acting there would probably be something tame and uninteresting on the whole, as an affected imitation of reality. It would, however, be essentially different in its abstract principles as an art, from the theatre as invented by ÆSCHYLUS, and transmitted to modern times. The true character of the Christian, shewing meekness under insults, forgiving his enemies, and humbling himself with uncomplaining, unimpassioned submissiveness to the tempestuous Providence of heaven, would make but a sorry figure before a popular audience. The actual stage, then, in its best and purest forms of Grecian moral, we think, is dangerous, because the principles of its very structure and

being, require that it present the living image of palpable wickedness.

What then shall we say of the multitudes of plays which contain much more of wickedness than the rules demand, and wickedness indeed in contrariety to the rules? We need not appeal to the entire history of the drama for the proof of this. The writings of its most distinguished and respectable defenders concede and lament the fact. The mighty SHAKESPEARE, with a genius truly marvellous, and intellectual beauties more than matchless, cannot be indiscriminately read in any decent family; and he is acknowledged to be by far the purest of all his contemporaries. In the time of the second CHARLES, the stage became still worse, and presented a series of comedies which SIR WALTER SCOTT allows were "Fitter for a brothel than "for the library of a man of letters." Afterwards, in the days of CONGREVE, affairs were not mended. The elegant writer, and candid friend of the stage, above quoted, says of the comic writers of this period, "They form a ga-"laxy of talent scarce to be matched in any "other age, and which is only obscured by "those foul and impure mists which their "pens, like the raven wings of Sycorax, had "brushed from fern and bog." With what superior wit, and sense, and learning, JEREMY COLLIER swept them at least from the stage of

controversy, extorting penitent submission from DRYDEN himself, the prints of that time still sufficiently declare. "At the perusal of COL-"LIER'S Satire," adds SIR WALTER, "men "started at the mass of impudence and filth "which had been gradually accumulated in "the Augean stable of the theatre during the "last reigns." And when another COLLIER shall arise to dissect the plays which have since appeared amongst us, it will then, but not till then, be seen, with some conviction on the public mind, that we have not materially improved in the morality of stage-playing. Gross indecencies have been abated; but all the pernicious seductiveness remains.

Indeed, it always will be so while the morals of society continue in a state of corruption; because the stage must conform to the taste of the people. This conformity is not denied, but is freely acknowledged, and often used as an exculpation of the poet and the player. This has been the case from the beginning, as the author of the *Poetics* himself admitted the objection; and LEWIS VIVES* informs us, that "Comedy "treats of the knaveries and tricks of love, be-"ing brought into it by MENANDER, *to please* "*the Macedonians that stood affected to such* "*passages.*" Modern critics make no hesitation

* See his *Notes* on ST. AUGUSTINE, p. 59.

in confessing this mischievous property of the theatre, among whom Mr Pope observes, in his preface to Shakespeare, "It must be allowed "that stage-poetry of all others is more particu-"larly levelled to please the populace." Moliere has tortured the character of Alcestes, in the *Misanthrope*, purposely to excite laughter, and laughter too of the most pernicious tendency, considering the qualities of simplicity and goodness which are frequently the subject of it. This, we think, is admirably proved and illustrated by Rousseau.*

Hear again, from the prologue written by Dr Johnson, and spoken by Garrick, at the opening of Drury-Lane Theatre, in 1747:—

"Ah! let not censure term our fate our choice,
"The stage but echoes back the public voice;
"The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
"For we that live to please, must please to live."

A still more striking, nay, shocking evidence of theatrical compromise, the public will remember, took place some years ago, when it was regularly proposed to effect some alterations in one of the London theatres, for the purpose of excluding a certain class of females, from that part of the house; and when the proposal was rejected for this reason,—that the

* See his *Thoughts on Different Subjects*, vol. II. p. 7.

measure would occasion the absence of multitudes of the other sex, who visited the theatre on purpose to meet with this description of company. At the time when the horses were introduced upon the London stage, Mr Sheridan observed in parliament, that a taste so vicious was not to be ascribed to the managers; but to a luxuriant state of society, in a country abounding with riches, and fastidious in its entertainments. Such managers would not probably be over anxious to contradict the *moral taste* of the people.

Other evidence on this particular will not be asked, otherwise an abundance might be produced, and from the same indisputable authorities, authorities all ranged *on the theatrical side of the argument.* A strange state of things, by the bye, as the theatre, according to the English editor of Riccoboni, " Has ever been " esteemed the best school for polishing and " improving the manners of a people." It would seem the scholars have rebelled against the master and his ushers, and dictated the lessons most to their own liking.

Now, I ask, is there the shadow of this flattering and pernicious suppleness in Christianity? Are not its fallible ministers, whatever be their differing opinions on other points; or, indeed, whatever be the private character of individuals of their body, unanimous in publish-

ing the purest morality? Whoever knew of a minister preaching revenge, and pride, and lasciviousness? Such is the dignity of sacred truth! Itself thus immaculate, and unbending as the pillars of the earth, it must stamp with its own authoritative reprobation, a system which, as in the case before us, can plead self-convicted of lowering that lofty standard of moral purity which the Eternal has planted by his own right hand; and can still, to *please* and *live*, (O God have mercy!) *repeat* and *defend* the desperate presumption!

And while the audience hold themselves in possession of this sovereignty, we may judge of the nature of the tasks to be imposed on the performers. And from this action and re-action of the parties, we might farther predict what would be the alarming consequence as to the state itself, did not some counteracting elements mix in the composition of civil society. Hence, though a certain policy has led to the legal toleration of theatres, governments have still considered them as evils to be carefully watched and restricted. At the restoration, even our dissipated CHARLES found it prudent to limit them to two for the metropolis. Had they been schools of virtue and good manners, it would have been excellent policy to multiply them by hundreds,

In the *fourth place*, we observe, that the im-

posing circumstances of the theatre, the oratory, the decorations, the music, &c. give prodigious effect to the characters and manners represented, and by consequence to the moral evil exhibited. The critical RAPIN concedes, "That in the theatre, the heart yields itself "over to all the objects proposed to it; that "all images affect it; that it espouses the sen- "timents of all who speak; and becomes sus- "ceptible of all the passions presented to it, "because it is moved."* Now is not this sufficient to throw the mind from its balance? "Amid this general dance and ministrelsy," will the heart, perhaps already greatly corrupted, regulate the general effect, so as to resist the undue impression of what is evil, and carefully select that small portion of moral good which comes floating like a straw upon the general tide? If persons of rank, or education, accustomed to splendour, or reflection, should, from their intellectual strength, maintain some superiority, and fixture of mind, will this be the case with the inferior parts of the audience? Indeed the swollen grandeur of the whole is calculated to operate on the romantic and aspiring notions of multitudes in every rank of society, in awakening morbid sensibilities and wishes, and in returning them to the low vale

* See his *Reflections on the Poetics.*

of ordinary life, dissatisfied, if not disgusted, with its plain and unadorned realities.

Again, the great influence of strong and gratifying impressions, frequently repeated on the mind of youth, in forming the character by slow and almost unconscious degrees, must be obvious to every thinking person. By the dramatic representation, for instance, of a brave but revengeful personage, admiration is excited; an admiration greatly heightened by the pleasurable emotions of the evening. Thus the seed of similar revenge is sown in the unguarded heart, which may neither be of immediate, nor of rapid growth; but which, when injury is felt, will shew itself in the same loftiness of honourable resentment, so called, and give, perhaps, a determination of this kind to the character through life. The same might be said of other passions which need not here be specified. That the mind takes its tincture from the subjects with which it is particularly conversant and delighted, is no new discovery. DEMOSTHENES remarks, "In my opinion, it is altogether im- "possible that those who are occupied, for ex- "ample, in matters of trifling import and un- "worthy of their attention, should ever pos- "sess an elevated and vigorous turn of mind; "for it must necessarily follow, that of what- "ever nature be the pursuits of men, such will "be their sentiments and inclinations."*

* Ολυνθ. Β. δ.

It is therefore incorrect to suppose, that the theatre has *no* pernicious tendency, because the whole audience do not, on their dismissal from the play, immediately, unanimously, and violently proceed to the full degree of delinquency of which man is capable; as if moral causes produced their effects with the same certainty and promptitude which are observed to attend the operation of causes in the physical world. Temptations the most gross and powerful do not always take effect. Shall we, therefore, say that they have *no* tendency to mischief? Is there no danger in the field of battle, because some are merely wounded, and some escape unhurt? Nothing could be more vile and demoralizing than the religious rites sometimes observed in several of the Grecian temples, yet numbers, it is well known, maintained, notwithstanding their attendance there, a conduct such as we sometimes describe as a life of *common decency*. Some have led the life of a drunkard for nearly fourscore years, but what physician will aver that drunkenness has no tendency to destroy the constitution of the frame? "Those "deceive themselves extremely," observes the Prince of Conti, "who think that plays make "no ill impression on the mind, because they "do not find them excite any formed evil de- "sire. There are many degrees before one "comes to an entire corruption of the heart;

" and it is always very hurtful to the soul, to " destroy the ramparts which secured it from " temptation. One does not begin to fall when " the fall becomes sensible ; the fallings of the " soul are slow, they have their preparations " and progressions, and it often happens that " we are overcome by temptations only by our " having weakened ourselves in things which " seemed of no importance ; it being certain " that he who despises little things, shall fall " by little and little."

The immoral consequences of the theatre will not probably be so immediate and notorious in persons of repute and decency, who have fixed upon their minds the conviction of its innocence, and have accustomed themselves to enjoy its impressions, as in the case of those who secretly suspect, or admit its evil tendency, and yield to the tempter. In this last instance, the energies of the soul are roused by a struggle, which, if it be determined on the wrong side, may speedily be followed by overt acts of crime ; because those energies *continue*, impelling the mind to action after its choice has been decided ; as he who attempts to reach a certain point may, from his vigour and impetuosity, run considerably beyond it. But the former case involves no opposition. All is peaceful, harmonious, and uniform. The heart and its allowed amusements move consentaneously in

the same direction. The mischief, however, is not the less effectual and diffusive. It makes a silent but certain way to the inmost soul of the man, and feeds and strengthens the more corrupt elements of his character; a character, perhaps of common, not of *Christian* morality; the character, indeed, of those whom St Paul describes as "Lovers of pleasure more than "lovers of God." This idolatrous excess of pleasure will be cherished by the theatre. The most that can be said is, that this fashionable sort of morality is not materially affected by it. Still the theatre serves to rivet the dreadful chain of sinfulness and curse which is unconsciously sustained. There may be a hidden process of iniquity where there is no monstrous burst of passion, or of actual disobedience to the authority of God. For instance, the calm and constant grasp with which pride or envy holds the human spirit is, in some respects, more mischievous than paroxysms of anger, and always more deceptive.

Perhaps some friends of the theatre will admit the existence, to some extent, of the tendency in question, but will rest the cause on certain principles of moral effect interwoven with the drama, which are presumed to give the whole a virtuous turn; as the law of gravitation acts upon the planets, and attracts them from their projectile inclination into orbits of

surprising regularity and usefulness. The testing of these principles will be the subject of another section.

III. *Of the Principles of Moral Effect attributed to the Drama.*

It was observed, that certain principles of effect, interwoven with the drama, are professed to lay the system, and especially acted specimens of bad character, under ample contribution to the moral improvement of society. It remains to offer some remarks on the inefficiency of these principles.

In the *first* place, much imposing disquisition has been written to shew, that the tragic excitement of terror and pity tends to purify the passions. This was originally asserted by the celebrated author of the *Poetics*, but was not by him very fully illustrated. Hence his commentators and disciples have widely differed on the subject; some thinking the purgation referred to pity and terror only, and others that it reached through these two passions to all the rest; one party contending that it involved the simple tempering of both, and another that it went to dispossess the soul of their very existence. Certain critics deem it nothing more than the result of the moral lesson of the tragic

scene. And some eminent expounders of the stage have denied the fact of this purgation altogether.*

What great use would arise from being freed from pity, would be difficult to point out. Nor is the moderating of these passions of the first importance in the moral process. If the great bearing of the theatre went, with some success, to curb the selfish passions of pride, sensuality, and covetousness; and to strengthen and expand the whole train of the benevolent ones, there would then be some colour for these lofty pretensions of the stage. We deny not, that for the time, a certain soothing, softening, pleasurable melancholy may be diffused through the soul, by the feeling of pity artificially excited; but that this will improve, in real life, the pity of the man whose general principles are bad, we cannot understand. It is neither explained nor proved. Nor does the fact confirm it; for it is commonly remarked, that those who are most attached to works of fiction, and can weep most plentifully at scenes of imaginary woe, are frequently, of all others, the most insensible, at least to the practical effect, of scenes of genuine distress. Accustomed to the high seasoning and excitement of the theatre, the com-

* See MANWARING on the *Classics;* TWINING'S *Notes on the Poetics; Essay on the Theatre*, &c.

mon food of pity, furnished in the afflictions of real life, loses much of its stimulating property, or perhaps becomes distasteful. It may here be added, that a *moderate* excitement improves the *habit* of the feeling, while *excess* commonly terminates in morbidness and apathy.

The pleasure of this tragic emotion, it is probable, is the chief design of the auditor, and hence he is not likely to go beyond his object. How then can the pleasure which is indulged on a principle of selfishness, issue in the generosity of a genuine tenderness? This self-amusing auditor will take pretty good care that his favourite prejudices and vices, which used to corrupt his fear and pity, shall not be dismissed on his return to common life.

Now, one single instance of this kind, I think, would be sufficient to throw discredit on the theory. Christianity can *never fail* to effect the highest moral purification in the mind that fully yields to its embuing influence; the evil lies in *repelling* this sacred energy, even among those who make profession of its principles. But behold a man beneath the awful sovereignty of the tragic scene. He has entered the theatre with the *wish* to be conquered. He is the *willing*, the *delighted* subject of such thrilling emotions as put him in possession of the *genuine spirit*, and *full force* of the tragic system. He weeps profusely at the imitated

sorrows and perplexities of the hero, and retires with an ineffable sadness and sympathy for the hapless image that still moves to the view of his enamoured fancy. He returns again, and again, to be the still more perfect subject of similar impressions. Is he not now a prodigy of fraternal kindness, and an angel of benevolence to some wide extended neighbourhood? On the contrary, he becomes increasingly insensible to the interests of his friends and family, in the habitual neglect of his duty towards them, and finally begins to lose all *pity for himself*, and accelerates his own destruction by a succession of egregious follies. Nor is this fiction, but fact; as the cases, were it requisite, could be readily produced. Few, I believe, who are thoroughly acquainted with the history of any given theatre, will be unable to point out numbers of such instances. Suppose the above unhappy character be not *thus demoralized by his attendance at the theatre*, still he is himself an evidence of the inefficiency of tragic emotion as to its alleged value in the cultivation of his pity.

On the other hand, the existence of this passion, in its happiest developement, among thousands of excellent and valuable men, who, to say the least, have never formed the *habit* of attending the theatre, seems still further to narrow the importance of tragedy as to this parti-

cular view of its power. The great HOWARD is an instance of the most genuine and finished sensibility, but this was not acquired at the theatre; his religious principles, as well as his benevolent pursuits, precluding at least his habitual appearance at such an amusement. As some, however, may observe, that single instances prove nothing, I ask, (and the argument entitles me to ask), are those, *in general*, who frequent the theatre, distinguished above others for a purified, and rational, and useful tenderness of feeling? And have the most eminent benefactors of mankind, speaking of them *as a body*, owed their eminence, as far as a moving pity has contributed to form their character, to an attendance on the theatre? And, on the other hand, are the enemies of the theatre, viewing them *at large*, more obviously and decidedly the subjects of an uncharitable and obdurate kind of feeling than its friends? If all this must be denied, we have then a right, (at least I think so), to conclude, that tragedy is not possessed, in any *tangible* degree, of that celebrated property of purifying the passions which, it would seem, has made its most shining figure in the *writings* of literary men.

MR TWINING, perhaps the most sagacious and candid of the commentators on this subject, is by no means confident. Having stated his opinion, he modestly submits it to the judge-

ment of his *philosophical* readers. And thus a doctrine, that assumes a pompous character of profundity and utility, in the theories of the drama, is reduced, even by the discrepancies and concessions of its friends, to nothing, or next to nothing; at least as far as relates to its *practical* bearing on the moral improvement of mankind. But if the virtues, after this flooding of the soul with pleasure, are said to grow of themselves, *unknown* to the understanding, or will, or conscience of the moral agent, I think we shall then be justified in saying, that there is even such a thing as *theatrical enthusiasm!* Indeed, considering what are the component parts of moral character in the generality of tragedies, it might seem that pity would be even *pernicious*, melting the soul to the love of the hero, and endearing his evil qualities, if not his crimes, to the audience. To conclude this topic, I presume, that a very superior mode of cultivating this amiable passion, is, frequently to visit the abodes of *real* sorrow, and on the scene of deeper grief than the sufferer *will* or *can* express, to drop our genuine charity, "Weeping "with them that weep."

But, in the *second* place, the stage is said to be of great use, because, by its pictures of character, it awakens our instinctive approbation of virtue, and detestation of vice. When it is ascertained, with precision, that such feelings

are strictly *instinctive* and *natural*, apart from tuition, and the light and power of heaven; still it will be necessary that the spectator come to the theatre with his instinct *unbiased* and *uncorrupted*, else where is the probability of its favourable excitement? Would one who, through *error*, (to use a soft word,) believed it right to kill the body for the sake of the soul, detest the sight of a martyred heretic? And will he who is attached to a certain line of conduct by *vice*, relinquish it from *seeing* a few instances of its character and mischief imperfectly represented on the stage, while, after having *felt* the unhappy consequences of his folly a thousand times, he never thought of an amendment?

But should we allow this instinct, how basely must it be decoyed, and bribed, and confounded, by gilded exhibitions of crime in many principal characters on the stage, which are obviously designed, or from the interest they excite are calculated, for imitation? THIS IS THE GRAND EVIL OF THE THEATRE. The rules of the drama have not yet prescribed the proper limits to the acting of moral evil, and the poets have made most ample use of the licence. They go too far, and still not far enough. We detest IAGO, but we are pleased with FALSTAFF. Here again we have the concessions of the mightiest advocates and critics of the drama.

The Stagyrite himself, according to TWINING, "admitted, with PLATO, the danger of poetical, embellished, and flattering exhibitions of vice." DR JOHNSON has observed, "LOTHARIO, with gaiety which cannot be hated, and bravery which cannot be despised, retains too much of the spectator's kindness. It was in the power of RICHARDSON alone to teach us at once esteem and detestation; to make virtuous resentment overpower all the benevolence which wit, and elegance, and courage, naturally excite; and to lose at last the hero in the villain." He adds elsewhere, "There is always danger, lest wickedness, conjoined with abilities, should steal upon esteem, *though it misses of approbation.*"

Indeed, this species of effect is so powerful and certain, that it seems to be a rule, in the formation of the characters, to supply the deficiency of the hero as to estimable qualities, by adorning him with such as are great and splendid; purposely to excite that interest in his favour which otherwise would be sunk and lost.* And the author of an *Essay on the Theatre*,† after having given us critical rules for composing plays, subjoins this admission: "Our dramatic writers seem to have made it *their business* to familiarize their au-

* See TWINING, Note 155. † Lond. 1760.

" diences to vice, and we need make *no doubt*, " that the immorality of the stage has *greatly* " *contributed* to that universal depravity of " manners, which is but too visible among all " ranks of people." I ask, can the *most perfect puritanism* dictate a more dreadful sentence against the theatre than has been here deliberately promulgated by the pen of one of its most intelligent and fast friends?

In the *third* place,—*Ridicule* is another boasted moral engine of the drama. However this may be legitimately applied to the foibles of mankind, I think there can be no question of the monstrous incongruity and perniciousness of a ridiculous personation of *crimes* upon the stage. What! will any one be cured of drunkenness, and swearing, and cheating, and lying, by *laughing* at those vices, either in himself, or in a ludicrous imitation of them? This is in such perfect opposition to the Christian Scheme, that nothing can be more so. Let any one contemplate the remorse, the shame, the grief, the contrition, contained in the Scripture representations of repentance, and judge whether such opposite modes of amendment can possibly exist combined in the same character? Heathen nations have been known to act on a far more philosophic view of human nature; and TACITUS ascribes the virtue of the ancient Germans partly to their never using ridicule in reference

to crimes, but always holding them up to utter abhorrence.* Hear again the concession of a most distinguished patron and exquisite judge of the theatre :—" What is now held the *fit* " *subject of comic mirth and ridicule in Christian* " *theatres*, was never employed but to stir up " the utmost horror and commiseration in the " *heathen.* The *falsehood of the wife or hus-* " *band* has given occasion to noble tragedies ; " but a Scipio and a Lelius would have looked " upon *incest* or *murder* to have been as proper " subjects of comedy."†

Supposing, in *some* cases, and under *certain circumstances*, the *language*, not the *dramatic action* of ridicule, should be admitted as to crimes, still the pleasantry of the thing would belong to the censor, and not to the criminal, who ought to feel the application in the excitement of remorse and shame ; for in all instances of ridicule, if, when you laugh at the faults of another, he himself joins in the laugh, you are confounded, and the merriment is now at an end, as evidently useless, or probably pernicious. I here exclude *dramatic action*, and recur to the scale mentioned in the first section.

Nearly allied, if not essential to the ridicule of the stage, is *comic humour*. But what does

* "Inter illos nemo vitia ridet nec corrumpere et corrumpi seculum vocatur."

† See HURD'S *Horace*, vol. I. p. 114.

the highly gifted writer, just quoted, deem essential to this humour, at least to that which is most popular on the English stage? His words are these:—"The historian of *Peru* tells us, "that there were no obscenities in their co- "medy; and an encomiast of *China* pretends, "that there is not so much as an obscene word "in all their language. I am sensible, that "though indeed, these must needs be consider- "able abatements to the humour of their "comic scenes, yet their ingenuity might pos- "sibly find means to remedy these defects by "the invention and dexterous application of "the *double entendre*, which on our stage, is "found to supply the place of rank *obscenity*, "and, indeed, to do its office of exciting "*laughter* almost as well."* From the sacred profession of this vigorous writer, I am willing to believe, that he could not in the least approve of the adoption of such means, in a public audience, to mend the morals of society, though his words might seem to bear this unhappy construction. His authority, however, as conceding *the fact* of this adoption, is such as no friend of the drama can dispute; and I leave it to the judgement of all good and candid men to say, whether, by the employment of such a species of ridicule, the sanctity of public

* See HURD's *Horace*, vol. I. p. 251.

morals is likely to be well secured and promoted.

Fourthly,—Great stress is laid on the moral sentiments contained in plays. Is instruction the object of those who attend the theatre? They candidly confess it is not. Is that instruction afterwards remembered and dwelt upon in conversation? Yes, when the propriety of this amusement is contested; then, but not till then, they abstract it, with some difficulty, from the rest of the piece, by way of vindication; shifting the defence to a plea to which they have no claim, as those who indulge in extravagant dress tell you, it is good for trade.

The *piquant* amusement which stamps the character of the stage forbids any solemn recognition of religious considerations. Tragi-comedy is condemned by the rules of dramatic writing, because with the strong tide of one sort of feeling, that of its opposite is met in a manner too abrupt and violent, to the distressing confusion of both. Transferring the principle to the *moral* view of plays, it answers equally to good taste and experience, that the solemnities of religion should not be mixed up with loose recreations, such as light music, &c. It follows, that the moral sentiments of the theatre can never be presented in a genuine light, and as fixed upon a true basis. They are not drawn from the pure fountains of the

Sacred Scriptures, and are therefore mixed up with much of dangerous error in relation to the *principles* of morals ; and, supposing them to be unimpeachably sound, yet the points to which they approximate are comparatively few, and those by no means of the first importance. Nor are they sanctioned, and riveted upon the heart and conscience, by any serious and direct recognition of divine authority, and of the awful tribunals and appointments of eternity. Indeed, moral sentiments are not to be found at all in many long acts of the most popular productions. I speak generally. The exceptions are, however, so extremely few, that though, collectively, they might impose upon the mind by their absolute extent, yet given in their relative proportions, as parts of an immense whole, they would diminish almost into nothingness.

Are we not also in much danger of omitting to discriminate between morality and that which is merely intellectual. The antients sometimes used the terms good and bad in a wider sense than was correct, or safe, as to morals ; reckoning wisdom and eloquence among the virtues, and what was trifling and mean, among the vices. Who can help smiling at the *moral virtue* of walking with stateliness along the streets of Rome ?* A little of the same inaccu-

* See *Cicero De Off.*

racy has crept into our own language, especially as used by ignorant and vicious men when speaking under the influence of strong prejudice, either for or against the subject of their observations. Where is the morality of SHAKESPEARE's beautiful description of Dover Cliff; and of an infinity of other passages in the same great author? His intellectual beauties are great and numerous, but the pure moral of his works, when sifted from the mass, will be reduced within a very narrow compass; nor is this at all surprising, if, as DR JOHNSON thinks, "He wrote without any moral purpose." The indiscriminate perusal, therefore, of such mixed productions, by young persons, unadmonished and uninstructed, as to the difficult and dangerous path which leads through this enchanted ground, must be attended with such hazard as no Christian parent would wish to put in the way of a beloved child.

And is not superior instruction to be obtained elsewhere, without the great moral risk and danger which all parties agree to be connected with the theatre? Is it wise to take the dangerous side in a doubtful case of great importance? But the good things are usually lost in the preponderance of the evil things, and in the amusing effect of the whole. Again, those who plead these good things, forget to balance them with another kind of instruction, with which they are

often found in artful combination—the instruction, by precept or example, how to manage an intrigue, to subvert the authority and elude the vigilance of a parent, to cheat a creditor, or to hatch some conspiracy against a magistrate or a sovereign. The amazing talent and dexterity with which these projects are conducted, through the invention of the poet, are not often equalled in the history of real corruption. And to teach the younger part of an audience the art of *expressing* the passions is often dangerous, were it only from the principle, that a facility in such kind of expression re-acts with strengthening power on the passions themselves. The question then, is, whether the virtuous part of plays in general, is such as to counteract their native tendency, or turn them to advantage?

Indeed the *good* things of a play, it is to be feared, are frequently the *worst;* as they identify themselves with the whole tissue of the piece, and lend the authority of truth and sanctity to error and iniquity. At the close of a drama, which has *entertained* the audience with living pictures of vice, some fine moral is suggested, which, like SATAN as an angel of light, sheds a deceptive radiance over all that has preceded, and bribes the conscience of the unwary; who are now very willing to believe, that they have been most virtuously employed, instead of

seeking nothing but their own gratification. Still, the common observation is, "There are "many good things in plays." Granted. But where is the argument? So there are genius and morality in *Don Juan*, and the writings of LORD ROCHESTER; yet who will say this justifies the publication of such trash?

Lastly,—A profound principle of dramatic operation lies in the ideal character of the whole; the truth of history, which dwells on such instances as are particular and defective, being rejected; and the abstract of nature being adopted, to furnish pictures of far nobler properties and dimensions than can be seen in the world of reality. This the drama has in common with the other arts of imitation. The principle is important, when legitimately applied, and gives to the mind the conscious proof of its own eternal destination, where alone it can find objects vast as its loftiest desires. The colossal statue, the pyramid, and every other instance of imaginative grandeur give a swell to the soul, and accustom it to expansion; thus equally imparting to it vigour and refinement.

In the drama, however, the principle is carried to excess; the entire subject, and scene, and action, being raised so high above ordinary life as to prove too much for human weakness, producing an intoxication of the mind which

often leaves behind it vacuity, imbecility, a contempt for the common allotments of Providence, and an extreme disinclination to the plainer, and self-denying duties of social relationship. Hence, if the imagination should have been pre-disposed to extravagance, certain ruin is the consequence. A person of this description, after leaving the theatre, feels a mighty inclination to transact business on the high ground of dramatic existence, and to buy and sell in blank verse.

The principle has its bounds, like every other source of pleasure and improvement. Again I recur to the scale, and observe, that a much more extended accumulation of imaginative existence may be advantageously presented to us in *writing*, than would be at all safe and proper in an artificial realization before a promiscuous audience; where, at least in many instances, neither the level of the intellect, nor the state of the moral principle, could sustain the overwhelming weight of the general impression. The truth is, in dramatic characters, the moral evil is drawn out into such dimensions, is so frequently the subject of the action, and yet receives so much of interest from nobler qualities, that the auditor becomes more familiarized with vice than is safe and proper; and when opportunity shall tempt, he scorns to be confined within the bounds of vulgar life; his love must

be romantic, his resentment must be dreadful, his ambition must be Roman.

The popularity of the drama leads to monstrous abuses of the ideal property in question; multitudes of writers being brought into operation, who are nearly destitute of the genius, and of the knowledge of mankind, which are necessary to a just conception of character. Hence poetic taste is outraged, and morals endangered, with a frequency that cannot fail to produce the most fatal results. It is not so with other arts. If, for instance, the works of the sculptor shew not something of the *true* ideal and perfection of his art, men of cultivated minds, instead of purchasing his statues, will utterly discourage him. But any thing in the form of a play will be applauded, provided it be *stimulating;* whatever be the nature, or tendency of the interest excited. The stage abounds, in consequence, with dramatic characters constructed as by perfect chance, and with a wildness of combination in regard to moral properties, which sets truth, and consistency, and good effect at absolute defiance. This is a fruitful source of that most dangerous display of character, already noticed, in which great virtues are seen to associate with the worst of principles, and sometimes with their opposite vices; leaving the false impression on the ignorant and unwary, that with such vices one may

still properly assume the designation of a good man. On this subject, the uninformed reader may be satisfied, by selecting almost any chief character of the drama, and applying to it the authoritative doctrine of *Christian morality*. The very touch of this doctrine, I presume, will be like that of ITHURIEL's spear.

IV. *Defensive Observations of the Advocates of the Theatre considered.*

ATTACHMENT to the stage, or to the *opinion* which defends it, is frequently maintained by those who feel a manifest conviction of its impropriety. I say *manifest*, because with regard to such, in controversy, as already mentioned, acrimonious observations, contempt, and an almost total avoidance of the leading arguments adduced against the theatre, sufficiently betoken the suspicions of their judgement; and their own subsequent confession has often put the fact beyond dispute. With views thus enlightened, many have yet resolved never to forsake the scene of their guilty pleasures, till the avenging fire of heaven, predicted by their own consciences, (for whatever be the character of the stage, such have been *their* sentiments respecting it), should overwhelm them with destruction. Others have lingered on the plain

with an enamoured reluctance; and by the ingenuity of the pleadings to which at last they have had recourse, evinced how high has been the preference of the heart for this enchantment, even when it stood in convincing contrast with the decisions of reason. The following are the principal efforts of their retreating strength.

In the first place we are told, that "Some "good people attend the theatre." The objector ought precisely to inform us what he means by *good*, as applied to character. We should then possess a fair chance of meeting this objection. Do those who evidently rank among the *best* of mankind, both as to piety and usefulness, resort to the play? Will any one do so in *proportion* to his advancement in moral excellence? Besides, can good people, so called, do no wrong? How often have we heard this language, "I used sometimes to attend the "theatre, but my conscience always smote me "for it?"

The principle, however, of this common objection, is obviously false and dangerous; because the doctrine and spirit of Christianity ought to regulate human conduct, and that conduct must never *determine*, though sometimes it may *illustrate* our interpretation of the rule. That numbers who attend the theatre do also go to church, and observe various forms of

religious duty, is acknowledged. But does this prove the innocence of theatrical amusements? I have often thought, that some pious individuals miss their way in appealing to such persons thus, "How can you consistently enjoy the "play, and then retire to your prayers?" The truth is, the prayers of some people can consist with *any thing*. Of this we have a striking instance in the case of a personage of high rank, from whose private letters, produced in court against him, it appeared, that he could bow his knee in secret, and pray for the partner of his *continued* guilt; and who, at the time when detected in his crimes, declared, "That he would "take his *Bible oath* in opposition to the charge" which he expected would be brought against him.* The deceitful snares of the human heart exceed all imagination; and danger must indeed be near when that heart becomes its own legislator.

Another observation is, "If plays contain "dangerous topics and allusions, so does the "Bible?" Might then every author introduce, without just cause, such things into his writings, pleading Scriptural precedent? The poets might as well vindicate some improper parts of their public dialogue from the example of the private medical consultations of physicians and sur-

* See *Remarkable Trials*, vol. II. p. 40.—Lond. 1780.

geons. But comic humour will not be found in those portions of the Sacred Scriptures referred to by the objector. Writings ought to be examined with due regard to the spirit and intentions of the writer; and a halo of the brightest sanctity hangs over every subject of that inestimable Book, when the whole is viewed in the grand connexion and scope of its parts. Nor were the topics in question designed by the inspired writers to be *acted on a theatre*. If so, I recur to the scale for proof of the absurdity of this objection.

Again, "If the stage be unsuccessful as to "usefulness, so is the pulpit." This is by no means owing to any integral part, or native tendency of the Christian system, but principally to that *repelling* state of the mind which we have already noticed. This cannot be said of the theatre, whose *general* ministrations we have shewn to be pernicious, and which has received into its character, if not its essence, the mischievous operation of immoral exhibitions. Besides, the body of a theatrical audience comes not within the sound of Christianity; and, therefore, religion has not a fair chance as to such, of demonstrating her power and excellence. If, however, it appears that the audience at church or chapel, is more virtuous *on the whole* than that which attends the theatre, the objection loses much of its point; and our tri-

umph is complete when the friends of the stage are asked, Where are the unquestioned facts which prove the moral usefulness of your system? Where are your converted infidels, your reformed rakes, your improved philanthropists? Of these Christianity can produce her thousands. It has been shewn that through *some* tendency or *other*, a great proportion of moral evil regularly emanates, in varying degrees, from the stage. Is it then at all probable that usefulness should issue from the same source? "Can the "same fountain send forth both sweet waters "and bitter?" On the other hand, the world abounds with the most striking proofs of the practical importance of genuine Christianity.

"But there are some who, if they go not to "the theatre, will resort to worse places." It is thus a famous advocate in the Scottish metropolis has vindicated duelling. He predicts, that its discontinuance would be followed by poisoning and assassination;* which the reader, I presume, will take to be the essence of the most perfect jesuitism; of which a leading maxim is,—the end sanctifies the means. Before the objection can tell upon the understanding, the arguments adduced on the evils of the stage must be disproved, and the system shewn

* See Mr Jeffery's *Address* to the Jury on the *Trial* of Mr Stuart.

to be safe and innocent; for no degrees of moral evil, however small in comparison, can be *allowed*, though with the direct intention of preventing the greatest crimes. The principle, if pushed, would go to vindicate the brothel, because, by possibility, that scene of wickedness might sometimes prevent murder. We appeal to the concessions quoted in this Essay, and to many others which might be collected, from the theatrical party; and to the whole history of the stage, as evidence, that the theatre itself is a perfect preparation of the senses and passions for such worse places, and furnishes a path the most direct and opportune to the chambers of crime and death.

Once more: "The stage, like every thing "else, requires discrimination, and they are "persons of a weak mind who are injured "by it. Why, then, because of its abuses, "which are candidly acknowledged, should we "be deprived of this elegant amusement?" Is not this saying in plain English, "Let the fools "perish everlastingly, for aught I care; if my "abstaining from the theatre would save a soul "of them, I would not abandon this classical "amusement." Most benevolently spoken! So then a tempting *occasion*, to say the least; an occasion of the temporal and eternal ruin of thousands; an occasion which appears from its history to have produced a mischievous ef-

fect, more or less, very regularly ; this *dreadful occasion*, with its consequences, must be perpetuated ; and for what? As the price, forsooth, of *an amusement!* Were the stage an institution of essential importance to society, its abuses, it is true, would be no sufficient reason for its discontinuance. But how mighty is the balance between *ruin* and *amusement!* Can the man be found on earth who will affirm, that the advantages of the stage decidedly outweigh its mischievous consequences? And, when thus found wanting, can it still find supporters in those who assume the benevolent designation of patriot, and of Christian? Shall a parent allow his infant children to *amuse* themselves with torches, at the risk of their lives, merely because it is possible they may escape destruction? And when some of them are burnt to death, shall he permit the others to resume the dangerous *amusement?*

It must be remembered, that the stage is a *peculiar* entertainment. Immense mischief lies in its compound character. As a composition it owes its existence to the corrupt invention of mankind. Let the parts be dissolved, and several of them will lose much of their destructive power, We condemn not *all* amusement ; yet if there be any *other* instance of the kind, which, like the theatre, is perpetually ruinous to multitudes of the souls and bodies of our

countrymen, while its highest character is that of *mere amusement*, as many of its friends are obliged, though reluctantly to admit, I hesitate not to say, that it ought to be abandoned. There is a material difference between the artificial and tempting obtrusiveness of the stage, and multitudes of innocent enjoyments, which nature and Providence have furnished for our recreation. These too, indeed, may be pushed to excess, through the folly of mankind; the other is *doubly* calculated to enchant and corrupt through its *own nature*, in connexion with that folly.

When the stage is opposed, the votaries of amusement seem alarmed for human happiness. A severe wound is inflicted on their feelings of humanity. The pleasures of rational and animated conversation, the interchanges of friendship, the charms of reading, the attractions of learning, and the beauties of creation, can by no means afford, in their view of things, a sufficient variety and pungency of entertainment. As to *Religion*, it seems to them as possessing nothing recreative or exhilirating. When its burdensome duties are over, the heart appears to sigh for some dram of re-invigoration from the more *stimulating* and *extraordinary* amusements of the world. No medium can suffice. Nature must be put upon her highest mettle; she must run, and leap, and fly, till recreation

itself is lost in the toils of the chase. Let the theatre be shut, and, with such individuals, it is as if the entire world of wit, and music, and eloquence, were at an end.

If it should be said, that such remarks are mere colouring; that a medium *is* admitted; and that the above enumeration of innocent delights must be allowed to be more than sufficient both for variety and intensity; I rejoice at the observation, and ask, why then is not the theatre expelled from the group, because of its undeniable and monstrous abuses? Would the annihilation of this single pleasure be an irreparable loss? The objector himself replies *no*. On the contrary, I think, this annihilation would be an incalculable gain to the health, and wealth, and character, and domestic comfort of multitudes in different ranks of society. Let common sense, and humanity, and conscience, decide on this one topic of a subject so important.

We gladly allow the candour of the concessions quoted in this Essay; but the question is, what is their *absolute amount?* Do they not prove the existence, in the theatre, of an extended, and organized, and uncorrected, and perpetuated system of immorality? If the stage have its *use*, let that use be shewn by a plain and rational theory, and by the production of tangible facts. Should the system be

purified, and rendered serviceable to society, the opposition it receives from the religious world would instantly cease. Let its sting be drawn, and no one would then object occasionally to amuse himself by admiring the beauty of its colours, and the gracefulness of its coil. But till this be effected, the innocent and inexperienced, must be warned not to tread within the scene of its deceptive gambols.

It has been said,—"That wit and humour "are given to man by a kind Providence, to "mitigate the ills of life." What then? May not the same be said of multitudes of sights, and sweets, and scents, and sounds, for the extravagant accumulation, and composition, and public participation of which, no theatres are built? Because the delicacies of the confectioner have their appropriate use and pleasure, must we bring them by waggon loads into some immense building, and there assembling by thousands, devour them without measure, to the injury of our health? And all this too, because a beneficent Providence has supplied them? Finding that it is natural for man to laugh, it would seem we must, in gratitude to the beneficent Author of this faculty, collect in vast multitudes to laugh in concert for three or four hours together; laugh at impious violations too of the sacredness of His name, and at imitated crimes committed against His "Just,

" and good, and holy law." " But all this is " so *natural.*" And so it is to sail right before the wind; and to seize, when hunger prompts, the first food that comes in our way, though perhaps it be the property of another as hungry as ourselves.

Sir Walter Scott, in defending the stage, speaks of " Those who entertain," he supposes, " a holy horror of the very name of a theatre; " and who imagine impiety and blasphemy are " inseparable from the drama. We have no " room left," he adds, " to argue with such " persons; or we might endeavour to prove, " that the dramatic art is in itself as capable of " being directed either to right or wrong pur- " poses, as the art of printing."*

This sarcastic use of the word *holy*, a term of the most awful significance, as the most inattentive glance at the moral perfections, and law, and authority of God will demonstrate, is not in the style of decorum so usual and peculiar to this admirable writer. Impiety and blasphemy are high degrees of wickedness, and are not unfrequently the crimes of the theatre; but no one, I believe, imagines, that *they* are necessarily blended with the essence of the drama. It does not, however, follow, that inferior degrees of moral evil are by no means interwo-

* See his *Dissertation on the Drama*, at the end.

ven with the system. We have already seen, that the living exhibition of undeniable rebellion against the Eternal Law-giver is essential to the existing stage. Whether it be possible to purify the system, is perhaps an enquiry which belongs to the facts of the case, rather than to abstract and theoretical conceptions of it. Who will point out the period when the drama was in a state of even tolerable purity? When the majority of its pieces, of its doctrines, precepts, maxims, characters, accompanying circumstances, and effects, were substantially good and commendable? To talk of *possibilities* in a matter of this vast importance, without producing facts, after an experiment of more than two thousand years, is strange indeed!

The allusion to printing ought to be justified by evidence that the stage is equally with that inestimable art, essential and important to the interests of society; otherwise it is of no force, because, supposing the theatre be capable of renovation, it is *actually* abused, and that confessedly by all parties to a considerable extent. As to the declaration—"We have no room left to argue with such persons,"—it may be asked, are there no common principles on which they may be met? Or does the author deem them to be so deeply enthusiastic as to banish all hope of succeeding with them in a rational disputation. This is to assume the question; con-

cluding, that he who is decidedly hostile to the theatre must, *of course*, be in the wrong. I think this shews, that the author himself is the man with whom there is no room to argue.

But had he condescended to make the attempt; and had he added unequivocal and forcible instructions to the body of dramatic managers and actors, successfully teaching them to effect that reformation which he believes to be so practicable, he would then, as I imagine, have done infinitely more to promote the true happiness of mankind, than is likely to be effected by all the poems, and tales, and antiquarian researches he has ever written. These indeed have their amusing effect, their chaste and thrilling charm; and what is more, they have some tendency to embue the public mind with sentiments of genuine loyalty; but viewing the existence of man as running out into a line of interminable duration,—which unfashionable view, our reason assures us, is the only accurate admeasurement of his being,—I cannot but regret, that this popular and competent writer has not added to his numerous works, some tract of *un*popular, but of super-eminent importance, for the purpose, if possible, of amending the stage; and of preventing the temporal wretchedness of innumerable families, and the eternal destruction of innumerable souls. But I must stop short. These are

sounds which, with many, are too vulgar and too *senseless* to excite any other feelings than those of disgust and contempt. This author, with his beautiful tales, will no doubt remain the unquestioned friend of humanity, for he soothes our ills with sports. This poor pamphlet must expect to be denounced as harsh and misanthropic.

Suppose the stage to be completely reformed, and to continue equally popular,—a thing impossible in a corrupt state of society,—it would then in its fundamental principles be quite another thing compared with the present theatre. This would not be a reformation, but a substitution of one species of system for another. Yet were the *pieces* pure and good, a reference to the scale, I think, would shew, that the action, the costume, the obtrusive exhibition of the female figure, the playfulness of manner inseparable from this description of amusement, would be dangerous, and at perfect variance with true christian feeling. It does not indeed appear, that amusement ought at all to be the subject of expensive public institutions, and of large public assemblies, regularly convened, that they may enter systematically and heartily into the spirit of a jest, or of sensations merely gratifying. This is to lift the thing far above its proper rank in human concerns. It is like erecting a magnificent

college with its appropriate statues, and its qualified professors, for cultivating the noble art of entering a drawing-room with peculiar grace. In proportion to this elevation will be the decaying influence of institutions of real and indispensable importance.

" But has not the drama its deep and beau-
" tiful principles; is it not founded in nature;
" partaking of the genuine character of truth and
" science?" It is no doubt curious, that while sympathy in real life has much of pain connected with it, a similar sympathy produced by fiction should impart unmingled pleasure. Mr Hume accounts for this from the predominant impression; an impression made by the perfect oratory of the details, which is extremely delightful, and imparts its own sweetness to such other species of the general feeling as would, separate from this magic, be distressing. But this is a corrupt application of an excellent law of nature. Who sees not, that predominant impressions may be greatly abused? What right have we to sweeten sin? It is according to another admirable law of nature, that the cupidity of the miser increases with his years; for we naturally grasp a valued possession in proportion as we perceive that we are likely soon to lose it. But who would say that covetousness is therefore a beautiful science? Immense mischief may be produced by the grand impression of tragedy. With regard to come-

dy, as ROUSSEAU has observed, the pleasure of it is usually founded in the vices of the human heart.

Our author's conception of a reformed stage may be partly gathered from his remarks in the *Dissertation*, on some popular dramatic pieces. The applause he gives to MR MATURIN must be founded on *Bertram*. And *John Bull* is praised as one of the best and most perfect productions of its kind. Did the limits of this *Inquiry* permit, it would be easy to shew, how far these two dramas are from comporting with christian principles, and with that christian temper and spirit which ought even to pervade our recreations. We confidently refer the serious observer to make the analysis and comparison for himself. As to the first, what pious mind can fail to be distressed at its hostility to the christian religion, the viciousness of its characters, and its outrage on dramatic justice? So much at least for an imagined reformation of the stage.

It has frequently been urged with a strange kind of triumph,—" Point out a single text of " Scripture which expressly prohibits the a- " musement of the stage?" In our turn we ask,—show us the text that expressly prohibits the negro-slavery of the West Indies? Had all the actual shapes and forms in which it is possible for the elemental principles of wickedness

to unfold themselves, been distinctly noticed by the inspired writers, the effect would have been weakened,—the Bible would have been a work of more immense size than the statute book of England. But if the spirit and design of the Scriptures; and the inferences which may be rationally deduced from them as premises, are in direct opposition to the existing theatre, it will then be an amusement decidedly unlawful. This is freely conceded by the advocates of the stage. Now I leave the reader to determine, whether, from experience, observation, and the arguments here offered to the public, it does not appear, that the general strain and temper of theatrical amusements is completely hostile to the holiness,—the devotion,—the continually subduing sense of the presence and majesty of God,—the awful apprehension of eternity,—and the extremely sensitive character of the moral conscience; which, Christianity, not only from its precepts, but from the dreadful and momentous grandeur of its arrangements, loudly demands?

This solemn state of the mind will never interfere with the joyous character of legitimate recreation; but will perfectly coincide with it; as the great law of gravitation, while it rests the universe upon its basis, never interrupts the more sprightly exhibitions of light and beauty, as witnessed in the dancing clouds, and in all

the varied decorations of a summer scene; but receives them into its own harmonies, and gives them poise and temperance. Let such fundamental laws, however, be counteracted by some electrical accumulation, or vacuum; or by removing the foundations of some massive pile, and they will rise in fearful power to assert their own unalienable sovereignty. Thus let the man who has been in elevated communion with his God, and with the worlds of eternity, come forth from the sanctuary of his retirement. Is he now unfitted for the business of this life? Is he unsuited in his spirit for the banquet, where well selected guests, of kindred disposition with his own, enjoy "the Feast of reason and the "flow of soul;" or for any of the numerous enjoyments which God himself has evidently furnished to soothe our passage to the grave? We repel the charge of ascetic sullenness and gloom, and exclaim, he is not. Let him deliberately pass from the throne of heaven to the theatre, and attend upon the shocking violations of Christian doctrine and piety exhibited, for instance, in *Bertram*, or *Pizarro*, or the *Stranger*, (plays of high popularity, and consequently proper specimens of the whole,) and will these two systems of general feeling shew no signs of mutual revulsion; of vehement disruption, of the one from the other?

Again, will any one deny, that those great

and numerous evils of the theatre, which are specifically acknowledged in the foregoing quotations from its friends, are condemned by the most express letter of the Scriptures? What! is there no text against familiarizing whole audiences with vice; expressing rank obscenity, or, in its absence, the more delicate, but more destructive *double meaning*, before a promiscuous public? &c. &c. The recollection of the reader will furnish him with the remainder of these sad concessions.

V. *Of the Argument drawn from Authority.*

Among great numbers who have recorded to posterity their decided opposition to the stage, as, in its *general character*, an evil of great magnitude, are the following:—

Of Pagans,—Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Solon, Isocrates, Plutarch, Cicero, Livy, Valerius Maximus, Seneca, Propertius, Ovid, and Tacitus.

Of States and Sovereigns,—Themistocles, the Lacedemonians, the Massilians, the Romans, Augustus, Nero, M. A. Antoninus, Constantine the Great, Julian the Apostate, Theodosius the Great, Valentinian, Gratian, and Valens.

Scipio Nasica, termed the high priest of Ro-

man virtue, prevailed with the Senate to forbid the building of a theatre at Rome, as a corruption from the Greeks, injurious to the antient morality, and more destructive to the state than Carthage.*

Of Christian Councils,—those of LAODICEA, CARTHAGE, ELIBERIS, COLLIOURE, ARLES, NICE, HIPPO, PARIS, and the LATERAN COUNCIL; as also the SYNODUS TURCONENSIS, the SYNODUS LINGONENSIS, and the SYNOD at ROCHET.

Of the Fathers,—TERTULLIAN, CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, ST. CYPRIAN, ST. AUGUSTINE, ST. CYRIL, ST. CHRYSOSTOM, ST. JEROME, ST. ISIDORE; Archbishops BRADWARDINE, PARKER, USHER, TILLOTSON, and SECKER; Bishops ALLEY, BABINGTON, KENNET, ANDREWS, BARCLAY, STILLINGFLEET, and HALL; Doctors REYNOLDS, GRIFFITH, WILLIAMS, ELTON, SPARKS, WHITE, BOND, and BLAIR; Judges BULSTRODE, and LORD CHIEF JUSTICE HALE; the Rev. Messrs VENN, CUNNINGHAM, MILNER, and GISBORNE; MR WILBERFORCE, &c. &c. &c.

Such is the phalanx of authorities drawn out against the stage. Now, I challenge the whole theatrical world, to produce an *equal* number of authorities, possessed of *equal* fame in their respective professions, *equally* capable of deciding on moral questions; and who have left, on

* *De Civit. Dei*, Lib. 1. cap. 30.

known record, testimonies *equally* clear and strong, all in *favour* of that which is the grand point at issue,—the *moral tendency* of the stage. I will venture to affirm, that no such army, displayed in this precise manner, (and the argument demands this precision), can possibly be produced.

But I shall be told, that some of these persons have actually written in *approbation* of the stage. If their writings on this subject contradict themselves, that is not our fault; and the champion of the theatre is at liberty, in drawing up his list of heroes, to take full advantage of this circumstance. The testimonies opposed to the stage are ready to be produced; and pretty strong ones they are, I can assure him, if he knows it not already. He must give me leave, however, to take the same liberty with his men. For I suspect he will lay a bold claim to Milton, Addison, Johnson, &c. whom we shall find, when considered with due interpretation, to be substantially, though not entirely on our side of the question.

Milton speaks, indeed, of the moral properties of tragedy; but he expressly confines his panegyric to the tragedy of the antients. Addison lamented the immorality of the stage; and Dr Johnson is well known to have expressed, though inconsistently, his abhorrence of the green room, and his contempt for the players.

These great authors were persons of the finest literary taste, which no doubt decoyed them into sentiments of undue attachment to the drama. It is true, they were moralists; but whether from their printed works, and more especially from their private lives, we may boldly infer, that they possessed a scriptural, profound, and uniform *piety*, without which every man, be his learning what it may, is so far unqualified to become an authority on this question, I leave the public to judge. Besides, let their dramatic publications be considered, and I ask, had all other plays been equally pure in point of morals, what would have been the probable condition of the theatre? What support would it have found? Would it now have had an existence?

It is said that St Chrysostom used to sleep with the works of Aristophanes under his pillow. But does this neutralize his eloquent opposition to the *public acting* of such plays? Must all who read Horace approve of hearing his improprieties pronounced upon a stage before a promiscuous multitude? Nor is the authority of Plato destroyed by his opposition to poetry; for he did not object to it *as such*, but on moral grounds connected with it. He expressly allows of hymns to the Deity.*

* See Vives *on St Aug.*

As to the authority of certain persons of eminence in the Church of England, who have patronized the stage, I have only to request, that it be *fairly balanced* with that of others in the same church. If we keep within the limits of eminence in writing, we might confidently boast as to *numbers*. But when we come to that particular kind of *weight* which the case requires, I am satisfied the theatrical scale will be found greatly wanting. For instance, Bishops HURD and WARBURTON appear, from the general character of their writings, to have made *letters their profession;* and studies practically religious, (I speak merely as to authorship), occupied a very subordinate place in their consideration. On the contrary, Archbishop TILLOTSON, Bishops BABINGTON, ANDREWS, and HALL, demonstrate by their works, that to impress religion immediately on the hearts and consciences of men was *their profession;* and literature, as such, was evidently, with them, an inferior subject of pursuit and of enjoyment. Now, which of these two classes should we chuse to be umpire on a point of moral casuistry?

It will again be replied, that the Fathers protested only against the scandalous *pantomimes* of the Pagans. There was indeed a distinction between them and the regular drama; and ST. AUGUSTINE mentions in one place, that the best

and most tolerable of stage plays were *tragedy* and *comedy*, which he calls *poetic fables;* but even to such, under the express names of *poetic fables* and *comedies*, he frequently, and decidedly, objects. Sir Walter Scott allows, that they were subject to the same sweeping condemnation with the public shows, because acted in the same place, and by the same performers. He thinks, however, they were unjustly so condemned. And certainly if the regular drama was so innocent and useful as many of the moderns suppose, it is somewhat strange, that neither the Fathers, nor the Councils of the Church, had the honesty to except them from the general censure. Their perpetual aim was not the *reformation* but *destruction* of the theatre. I am inclined to believe that the Christians conscientiously condemned the *whole*. That they were *really* condemned, is acknowledged by another great friend of the theatre, who asserts, that the Fathers re-barbarized Europe by their opposition to the stage; which must of course be meant of tragedy and comedy, and not of wicked pantomimes.* St. Cyprian abominates the theatre because of the indecent interchange of the dress of the sexes. And does not this exist on the present stage? The question comes to this: the Fathers either

* See *Annual Review* on Styles *on the Stage.*

did, or did not condemn the regular drama, as well as the common shows. Let those who assert, that they did not, prove the position by plain historic testimony. If they did, then it only remains for the advocates of the stage to detract, if possible, from the *weight* of such existing authority.

Is it probable the Fathers would have allowed the modern theatre? And was it not against the regular drama, that the Fathers of our British Reformation, from Archbishop Parker downwards, have protested? When such an army of distinguished Christians, the legitimate expounders of the faith, throughout a long line of ages, have strongly opposed the stage, it will be thought good *presumptive* evidence at least, that *Christianity herself* is its firm and changeless foe: "*Christianity*" Sir Walter Scott observes, "from its first origin, was "inimical to the institution of the theatre." And such are the men, Legislators, Philosophers, and Fathers, who, if they lived again, to lift up their voice against the theatre, would be denounced as *creatures of a weak mind, fanatics*, and *hypocrites!* But we rest not the cause on names. Even Euclid is no infallible authority for the result of a problem, apart from the process by which its truth is worked out. We recur to the arguments which directly relate to the *nature* and *effects* of the system itself.

Suppose there be no Scripture text, is there not some Scripture *case*, plainly applicable to the subject? Let us make the enquiry.

The theatre has given great scandal and offence to a large proportion of the christian world, for nearly eighteen hundred years. Suppose we allow, that, on this subject, such persons have been tinctured with enthusiasm; thousands of them have yet been characters of undeniable talents, and learning, and piety. The friends of the stage, who sometimes blame their opponents for contracted and uncharitable sentiments, it is hoped will not imitate their bigotry, denying the christian name to all who sin against the theatre. Observe again, that this amusement is not pretended to be essential and indispensable to the happiness of society. Indeed, if it were so, what would become of multitudes of persons who never see a theatre; for instance, the whole of the agricultural classes of this, and other countries?

Now, suppose the learned apostle of the Gentiles lived amongst us; and, from an exquisite taste for the beauties of dramatic poetry, should approve of the stage as an innocent amusement; still, what would probably be his sentiments on the subject of *offence?* Would he, who said, "If meat make my bro-"ther to offend, I will eat no flesh while the "world standeth;" would he insist on the

propriety of continuing the theatre, although it should occasion grief and displeasure to many thousands of his christian brethren ?

But I am told, that this is not the meaning of the case; that by causing a brother to offend, is understood to signify, the occasioning his fall into sin, by means of an example strictly good in itself, though not absolutely necessary; but which, through weakness, he perverts to his own destruction. I admit the interpretation; and will here apply it to the theatre with undemurring confidence.

Now it is expressly declared by the advocates of the stage, that its evil consequences have arisen chiefly from the peculiar intellectual and moral weakness of individuals. To patronize the drama is to perpetuate such consequences; for persons of this character, attending on the theatre, are by no means few in number. Again, there are multitudes, as has already been observed, who, though they feel convinced that this amusement is dangerous and unlawful, yet allow themselves to be drawn into its vortex, not merely by the attraction of its pleasures, but also by the authority of eminent examples. Thus they attempt at least to *lower* the voice of conscience. Here then, though innocence be allowed to the patron, so far as he is conscious that the stage is not in its own nature sinful; it is not always so with the man who follows in

his footsteps. But will it be imagined, that St Paul, whose feelings were so sensitive on the subject of *occasioning* the ruin of his weak brethren by the lawful use of flesh, which had been offered to an idol, supposing he asserted the innocence of the theatre, would countenance the stage in person, with the knowledge, that such patronage might be destructive to the souls of thousands; and all to promote his own amusement? Would this accord with his casuistry and example in the case just referred to?

To conclude this topic: for my own part, I am satisfied, that there are several texts of Scripture *directly* at issue with every thing which bears the unquestioned characters of the existing stage. Of these I will only mention the commencing verses of the first Psalm,* and Ep. v. 3, 4.†

Let these passages be examined, not as they appear in words, but as severally embodied in the living character, and as deeply imbuing the whole man; and, I doubt not,

* Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

† But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not once be named amongst you, as becometh saints: Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.

they will be found completely hostile to the theatre. And if this be denied, because the text does not specify this amusement in particular; I shall expect, in the next place, to find, that the most abandoned sinners are agreed to evade all Scripture sketches of their own moral likeness, merely because their proper names are not legibly appended to them.

VI. *Farther Remarks on the Pretensions of the Stage. Conclusion.*

It must be observed, that this discussion relates to the *moral question* of the theatre, and not to its literature simply considered. The dramatic form of *writing*, not of *acting*, may be employed with good effect, as is evident from the splendid productions of Millman. Nor can it be denied, that the ancient drama in particular, is, to some extent, a repository of fine learning, and of fine taste: a vehicle of poetic genius of the highest class, and a source of intellectual refinement and pleasure to minds of a certain description. But may not all this be said of the heathen mythology in general? Yet who would rebuild its temples, and *act* its vile and monstrous mysteries? The sublimities of learning, and the charms of literature, when connected with improper subjects, form a dan-

gerous temptation. Where the moral sensibility of the character is at all obtunded, in the same proportion, this temptation will effectually exert the magic of its power. If the depraved mind can sometimes be led to traverse the entire field of Sacred Truth, merely from the attraction of its intellectual beauties, what mighty force may not be expected to storm the soul, when such attraction is joined with sentiments congenial to every sinful propensity of the heart? Nor can it be surprising if, in our present state of moral frailty, this bewildering light should occasionally deceive the unwariness of good men themselves. This only proves how seductive are the finer and more unexceptionable pleasures of the theatre. Still the system seems incapable of renovation, at least of such improvement as to render it safe and proper for the populace at large.

It has been judged, that if genteel people *will* and *must* have this classical amusement, they ought to have their own private theatres, where, as at the opera, the multitude may be excluded from witnessing such scenes as are too powerful for their minds. In these private theatres, people of fashion, it is thought, might still assemble to behold each other; as, with such, *cum dignitate* is frequently the chief joy of the theatre. Who would not sparkle in the box, and vie with the fairest? For birds of

spirit always love to sing upon the topmost bough. And there the roarings of a popular audience might be avoided,—an audience which sometimes resembles, not a company of amiable beings, endued with reason and decency, but the monstrous personage of MADNESS, in the *Hercules Furens* of EURIPIDES, appearing in her ærial car with a hundred heads, round which hiss a thousand serpents. An amusement this, much to be enjoyed by people of wisdom and taste!—Such private theatres, it is true, would be lessening the evil; but would they amount to a perfect cure?

What a shocking picture of the evils connected with the London stage is drawn by SIR WALTER SCOTT at the close of his Dissertation! And what is the language with which he concludes it? "We notice these evils, *without pre-* " *tending to point out the remedy.*" Alas, for the British theatre, when its *best* friends are incompetent to devise a cure for its *worst* evils! Had a cure been possible, I presume this chaste and candid writer would have been happy to propose it. He does, indeed, observe, that the immense size of the London theatres increases the abomination; but we respectfully refer him to the ratio of the same evils in the smaller theatres out of London, for proof, that the poison is not to be allayed; is only to be resisted by its annihilation. Till this be accomplish-

ed, the quantity may be reduced, the quality will always be the same.

If, after all, it shall again be asserted, "That "the theatre is the best school for polishing and "improving the manners of a people," I cannot but express some wonder, that, supposing this to be correct, it has not received its origin and chief sanction from divine authority; for, admitting this eulogium, its cast of popularity, in connexion with its moral tendency, lifts it far above the common schools; and in some respects above Christianity itself, and many other institutions employed for the improvement of mankind. Though *they* have been omitted, it would seem the *theatre* might have been expected to hold a distinguished place, in the appointments and regulations of the Sacred Book. But where is the divine commission for players to set up for public teachers of morality? The honour of this grand invention was reserved for a company of rude peasants, who, sacrificing a goat to Bacchus, sang a drinking song to his praise,—a song which was occasionally relieved by a talking interlocutor, and the whole set off by the striking faces of the actors, which were besmeared with the lees of wine. Hence, according to some critics, Τρυγας, *wine lees*, gives name to tragedy; and κωμαζειν, *to be saucy, or to revel*, gives denomination to comedy. I think the Fathers did not reason justly in objecting

to the theatre, *merely* on account of its heathen origin; because, if the stage were *intrinsically good*, this could be of no force; but so far as this origin and this denomination serve to point out *the nature of the thing*, the argument is, no doubt, strongly subversive of the moral pretensions of the drama.—There is no trace of the buskin to be found in any part of the Jewish history, before the dispersion, as appears from the elaborate work of Lewis on the *Jewish Antiquities*.

I also feel surprised at the practice of contemning the profession of a player,—a profession deemed so excellent. I say the *profession;* for as to individuals, we shall find some in all situations unworthy of approbation. But, that Christians have agreed to despise the sacred ministry, because it is occasionally tarnished by misconduct, is by no means true in fact. The very indignation and sorrow which they sometimes express at the crimes of a minister, are a proof of the contrary. The same crimes in a player excite no surprise, no particular disgust; still the friends of the theatre agree to scowl at the profession. Here is manifest inconsistency. It seems as if immorality in a player were expected to result from his profession; for Voltaire informs us, that a man, to be a good actor, *must have the very Devil in him;* still the profession is asserted to be good, and still it is

despised. How the truth eludes us here, like the shiftings of the ghost in Hamlet!

Greece was the principal exception to this general contempt for players, which is thus accounted for by St Augustine, that the Greeks happened to look upon them as the servants of the gods, and chiefly for this reason gave them honour. The Romans maintained a different view, and detested them. Sir Walter Scott, however, very properly complains of the evident *injustice* of allowing and applauding players, and yet despising their profession and their persons. Whether some secret misgivings as to the professed excellence of the system itself be not at the bottom of this, we leave to the judgement of the impartial observer.

That the morality of this world,—principles of honour,—an amiable disposition,—and respectability of life and conduct,—is sometimes to be found among them, ought not in candour to be questioned; but is it not somewhat remarkable, that not a single actor, of *eminence in piety*, appears to have existed since the world began? Other professions are not thus barren of the nobler productions of Christianity, as the most effectual means of forming the character to high degrees of excellence. Biography presents us with the lives of soldiers, of lawyers, &c. who have been illustrious ornaments to the Christian name; while we shall absolutely look

in vain for a solitary instance of a player, who, supposing him to have felt the renovating power of religion, made it known to the world by those *peculiar* indications which clearly distinguish it, in every case of *eminence*, from the godless morality of the infidel. This is the more extraordinary, as men of great research, when complaining of their frequent want of success in seeking to discover memoirs of the lives of biblical critics, and others of much worth and fame, have observed, that they were seldom at a loss to meet with the history of celebrated actors.*

We may observe, that an advocate of the stage, evidently a person of talents and candour, has just acknowledged to the world, that, "As a whole, the character of our actors is in-"finitely beyond the morality of our *theatre*."† Let those lovers of the drama who have an extensive knowledge of performers, mark well this declaration. It involves a contest to determine, between the professors of the art, and the cause itself, which is *least* immoral and pernicious? Let us reason from the well-known facts of the lives of the actors. Is the system to be preferred? Then how feeble must be its corrective

* See the *Preface* to TOWNLEY's *Illustrations of Biblical Literature.*

† See New Monthly Magazine, No. XXXI. page 32.

power, when those at the *fountain head* of its influence remain, *as a body*, confirmed in immorality? And what must be its nature and properties, when multitudes of individuals of well-known wicked habits can take such pleasure in it, and with the liveliest relish, adopt it as the chief employment of their intellectual powers, and life? But if this point must be determined in favour of the profession, I ask, in the name of wonder, what then must the system be?

It is observable, that when a player becomes indisputably pious, and forsakes his former evil courses, he instantly abandons his profession. To say that this alone proves him to be an arrant enthusiast, not only wears the colour of illiberality; it also assumes the question as already settled, and as indeed itself a fixed principle on which the theatre may be boldly defended. This may be dispatch in argument, but is it logic?

I wonder at another thing, and it is this,—that with all the magnified importance of the theatre, as a moral institution, we never see, in books on education, any directions to send a loose and disobedient youth, or a proud or unchaste daughter, to the play-house, as a school of reformation. Nor do we hear from the lips of the aged and the experienced, (I refer to the friends of the theatre), the smallest counsel to this effect. Let those split this hair who can.

I will now relieve the reader from the tedium of this Essay, and plead for its length the *extent* and *importance* of the subject. In the attempt to omit no *capital* consideration belonging to a controversy on which many volumes have been written, it will not be surprising if, to persons unacquainted with this copiousness, the argument has seemed to be lengthened out beyond the necessities of the case. Others, I doubt not, will deem the whole to be sufficiently concise.

The friends of the theatre will, perhaps, be under no alarm at the tactics here employed. We have assailed them, it is hoped, by the weapons of *reason ;* they, however, lie entrenched in the stronger holds of *passion.* Some enquire not respecting any rational or moral ground of attachment to the theatre; and refusing to dispute the question, give rein to their propensities, regardless of the consequences. Others struggle for a time in argument, hopeful of a conquest, and close with the free avowal of their fixed fondness for the drama ; and what reply can be made to him who, collecting his whole strength, by one grand burst of resistance, confounds you with—*I like it !* Yet all are not so insensible to the mandates of reason ; and if only one parental pair should be reclaimed from their love of this dangerous pastime, by means of the arguments now offered to the public, the good effects even of this

partial reformation may be felt in the line of such a family for ages to come. A result like this, though much beneath the notice of his opponents, would be a noble satisfaction to the writer, who indeed is happy to learn that already this attempt has produced in some quarters a salutary impression. It is not pretended, that these pages are exempt from fault, written hastily, as they were, amidst a press of higher duties. The reasons in some instances may have their weaker parts; but, I throw myself into the centre of their *collective strength;* and if, on the approach of the foe, the *whole* should give way, still I shall fall without shame, and in the cause, too, of my country, being entirely conscious of the rectitude of my purposes.

I would anxiously attempt, borne out by the principles adduced in this discussion, to rouse my beloved countrymen to a deeper abhorrence of an evil, which is, as I conceive, incalculably mischievous to the morals of society. I would use the whole force of a legitimate and fearless influence in opposition to its destructive sway. I would call on British parents, by the tenderest yearnings of their affectionate solicitudes, and by the infinite importance of conferring an untainted education on the *imperishable minds* of their offspring, the culpable neglect of which is a cruelty not equalled by that of such mothers of antiquity as threw their children into a

quenchable fire to Moloch; I would call on persons of rank and opulence, by the awful responsibility of their situation, providentially designed to give shape and tone to the morals of multitudes below them; on the magistrates of the land, by the inestimable consequence of their personal example, even where they cannot legally exterminate an evil; on the sacred ministers of religion, by the sanctity of their office, which binds them to oppose the whole breadth of its authority and power against every system which stands, like that of the theatre, so confessedly the pandar of iniquity; on all these highly valued and respected classes of our extended and endeared population—I would call, as with the voice of a trumpet, beseeching them to revive in their minds a burning sense of the domestic and national, but, above all, of the *eternal* importance of the subject; and animating them to summon their respective forces to the field, and to fight against this citadel of vice with persevering unanimity and energy, till, by the help and benediction of Omnipotence, its foundations should tremble at their resistless attacks, and angels respond to shouts of victory mingling with the crash of its final demolition.

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